

Introduction to 'The Yen'an Literary Opposition' - Gregor Benton



In the spring of 1942 a series of articles appeared in the Yen'an press [see two of the texts [here](#) and [here](#)] which took as their theme the need to expose the 'dark side' of life in the Communist base areas of northern China. The authors of these articles saw themselves as upholders of the literary tradition of Lu Hsiün, modern China's best known literary figure, and used the *tsa-wen*—a laconic and fiercely critical essay form perfected by Lu Hsiün—as their literary 'dagger'.

This outburst of criticism and dissent was short-lived, and the writers involved were quickly silenced. But as the first in what was to become a long line of left-wing writer-dissidents, the Yen'an 'literary opposition' occupies a unique place in the development of revolutionary literature in modern China.

Their case also raises some fundamental questions about the function of literature in a revolutionary society. The writers themselves saw their role as monitoring and exposing tendencies towards bureaucracy and the growth of a privileged élite in the base-areas, and in the name of Lu Hsiün denounced all attempts to force literature into any kind of straitjacket ('Politics wants to preserve the status quo; thus it places itself in the opposite direction to literature as a symbol of discontent.')

They at first drew evident encouragement from Mao Tse-tung's own attacks on bureaucratism within the Party and the administration (delivered in February 1942), and echoed many of his criticisms. But Mao's own views on literature, formulated at the Yen'an Forum of May 1942, were the very antithesis of those of the writers, and shattered any illusions they might have entertained about a united front with Mao against the bureaucracy. Mao argued the task of literature in the base areas was not to expose the dark side, but to reflect the bright side of life and to exalt the masses. In his view the age of the *tsa-wen* was therefore over.

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of writers to a literary board of control was a more effective way of evolving such forms than free experimentation and choice at the levels of theory, production and consumption.

The *tsa-wen* translated below are generally representative of the type of criticisms voiced by the writers. Lo Feng's is closest in style to the original model. Wang Shih-wei's and Ting Ling's are interesting for other reasons.

Wang's essay, in its criticisms of the Yen'an proto-state, readily calls to mind later criticisms of bureaucratism advanced by the student leader Lin Hsi-ling in 1957 and sections of the Red Guard movement in the Cultural Revolution. Wang, a member of the ccp since the midtwenties, a revolutionary writer and theoretician and, according to literary watch-dog Chou Yang, the translator of two million words of Marxism into Chinese, saw his criticisms not as an attack on the revolution but as a means of defending it.

Ting Ling's famous essay, since condemned as 'narrowly feminist', is fascinating both for the light it throws on sexual relations in Yen'an and for its remarkable anticipation of themes later to be taken up by the Women's Liberation movement. To be sure, Ting Ling was not the Kollontai of the Chinese Revolution, but her remarks reveal important aspects of relations within Yen'an society hitherto obscured.

Like Wang Shih-wei, Ting Ling had been active in the revolution since the mid-twenties.

After the execution of her husband by the Kuomintang in 1931, she spent three years in prison and detention. She achieved early renown as a revolutionary writer, and was one of modern China's best known woman authors.

After the tsa-wen had appeared, the Party leadership immediately launched a fierce attack, spearheaded by Mao Tse-tung and Ch'en Po-ta, against the political and literary conceptions of the writers' group. The writers had at first drawn wide support from literary and youth circles in Yen-an, and a massive show-trial of Wang Shih-wei was staged to silence such opposition. Even during Wang's trial there was at first considerable dissent from the official condemnation of his 'deviations'. Liberation Daily complained of resistance from

'ultrademocratic and ultra-egalitarian tendencies'. The orthodox writer Ha Hua later wrote of the trial that 'some people openly asserted that the struggle against Wang was a case of

"emptying the chamber-pot", and that because of his mistakes everyone was tipping urine over his head. In addition, no few people were sympathetic to Wang's arguments and proposals.' [1]

Wang was singled out as a scapegoat for the group for two main reasons. Firstly, he was the least known of the dissident writers, and was therefore least likely to attract public sympathy.

Secondly, he went furthest of the group in his criticisms of Yen-an society. He criticized the selfishness and inhumanity of top cadres, the growth of differentials, the suppression of dissent and freedom of speech and the growing alienation of student youth in Yen-an. Wang was realist enough to recognize the need for differentials and special treatment to retain nonParty intellectuals and administrators in the base areas, but he argued that differential wages and rations for high-ranking Communists were both unjustified and would alienate the rank-and-file. (Lenin incidentally argued the same point after the Russian Revolution.) Wang's inquisitors directed their main attack not at his social analysis, but against his past Trotskyist associations. Since the word 'Trotskyist' was by this time synonymous in Party literature with 'Japanese spy', the charge was an especially damaging one and played a large part in swinging opinion against Wang. Even so, many voices continued to be raised in his defence.

After Wang's trial he was sent to work in a matchbox factory in Yen-an. Many

years later, during the Cultural Revolution, Red Guard sources revealed that according to Mao he was

shot by security forces during the evacuation of Yen-an in 1947—an action the Central Committee reportedly disapproved of.

Ting Ling and the other writers escaped more lightly from the affair. Unlike Wang, they had quickly given in to the pressure brought to bear on them by the Party. One by one they stepped forward to disavow their heresies and to launch merciless attacks on their former comrade Wang. Ting Ling herself announced Wang's expulsion from the Anti-Japanese Writers' Association and denounced him as a Trotskyist. During the following two years Ting Ling renounced creative writing and devoted herself to journalism. She also underwent a long period of thought reform. During the so-called 'anti-rightist' drive of 1957–58 Ting Ling, by now re-established as a literary figure of some influence, was once again criticized and subsequently purged as an inveterate 'anti-Party element'. The real reasons for the attack on her are not clear, but they appear to have been linked to a power-struggle in the Party's literary establishment.

The *tsa-wen* of the Yen-an 'literary opposition' deserve study both for the light they shed on everyday life in wartime Yen-an and on the nature of Maoism. Many writers have properly stressed the importance of the Yen-an matrix as a key to understanding the nature of the post-revolutionary regime in China. But the 'vision of man and society . . . built on the foundations of popular participation and egalitarian values' [2] is only one and not necessarily the dominant aspect of the Yen-an legacy, and must be set against the ruthless uprooting of oppositionist tendencies, the suppression of dissent, the concentration of power in few hands and the growth of the post-1940 leadership cult. This profound duality lies at the heart of Maoism. It explains both the quasi-Maoist derivation of the 1942 writers' group and its subsequent harassment by the Maoist apparatus—a fate which it shared in common with many of the groups summoned into being by the Maoist wand during the Hundred Flowers campaign and the Cultural Revolution.

[1] Quoted in *Ming-pao yüeh-k'an*, Hongkong, February 1966, p. 92.

[2] Mark Selden, *The Yen-an Way in Revolutionary China*, Cambridge, Mass. 1971, pp. vii-viii.

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<http://libcom.org/library/wild-lily>

<http://libcom.org/library/thoughts-8-march-women%E2%80%99s-day>

[For further discussion of Wang Shih-wei and the later development of the Maoist state bureaucracy see this article by Simon Leys.]